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LETTER DATED 11 NOVEMBER 1998 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF ETHIOPIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to transmit to you a copy of statement delivered on 11 November 1998 by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Seyoum Mesfin, to the diplomatic community in Addis Ababa on the crisis between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

As you are well aware, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) High-level Delegation on the dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea met at Ouagadougou on 7 and 8 November 1998 and submitted to both parties a proposal for a Framework Agreement for a peaceful settlement of the dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which Ethiopia has fully accepted.

I should be grateful if you would have the text of the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Duri MOHAMMED
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

Annex

Statement made on 11 November 1998 by the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia to the diplomatic community in Addis Ababa on the crisis between Ethiopia and Eritrea

I am very much pleased to welcome you all to this meeting and I wish to thank you for having responded to our invitation.

You recall the first meeting we had in May, immediately following the Eritrean aggression against Ethiopia, at which time I had the opportunity to brief you on the tragic crisis imposed on us by the State of Eritrea.

That briefing was made necessary, among other things, because the suddenness of the crisis and the unexpected nature of the invasion and the sharp deterioration in relations between the two countries that were least expected to be at loggerheads, much less be on a war footing, was a source of legitimate bewilderment to many. At that meeting in May, I tried to explain to you as best I could how we intended to resolve the crisis, emphasizing two points: our commitment to the peaceful resolution of the problem, and also underlining the imperative need for the aggression to be reversed and for the Eritrean forces to be withdrawn from occupied Ethiopian territory before serious talks could commence between the two parties on whatever disputes there might be between the two countries.

It is now almost six months since I had that opportunity to address you on this tragic development in our subregion, for which the Eritrean authorities assume full responsibility.

Today's meeting with you and the briefing that I wanted to give you became necessary because of the very important event - an event which we all have been awaiting for sometime - which took place in Ouagadougou over the weekend.

In a way the meeting that the Organization of African Unity (OAU) High-level Delegation had separately with our Prime Minister and the President of Eritrea, at which time the proposal of OAU for resolving the crisis between Ethiopia and Eritrea was made available to the two sides, was the culmination and the final result of a long and laborious process by the Organization of African Unity which included a fact-finding mission by an ambassadorial committee earlier, and a meeting at the ministerial level by the Committee in early August.

Let me state from the outset how grateful we have been to the OAU heads of State and Government comprising the High-level Delegation, the Secretary-General of OAU, Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, and the secretariat of the Organization for the firm position that they have taken on matters of principle and for the fairness and the sense of responsibility that they brought to bear on this very complex task that was entrusted to them. If their effort has not succeeded so far, there is little doubt about who is to blame and this in itself is not a new story.

Now, coming to the factual account of the events that transpired in Ouagadougou, I would like the benefit of Your Excellencies to highlight the major points.

After having examined the proposal for a Framework Agreement for a peaceful settlement of the dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia and having received a satisfactory explanation for clarification it sought on a few points in the proposal, the Ethiopian side informed the High-level OAU Delegation that it would have no problem accepting the proposal tentatively or ad referendum, emphasizing that its definitive and formal positive response along the same line would be forthcoming following consultation in Addis Ababa within the leadership. I am pleased to announce here today that our Prime Minister has now decided to communicate to the Chairman of the High-level Delegation Ethiopia's formal and definitive acceptance of the OAU proposal for peace. On the other hand, as must have been clear to the whole international community by now, the Eritrean response was the opposite. Eritrea has rejected the OAU proposal for peace.

It is hardly possible for anyone who has been following this crisis closely over the past six months to have been surprised by the respective behaviour of the two sides. We are simply rediscovering the wheel again and again. Ethiopia's position has been consistent; so has been Eritrea's.

For Ethiopia there have been two issues which have always been given absolute priority and primacy as forming the basis for resolving this crisis. The first has to do with its preference for the peaceful way of resolving this crisis and not responding in kind in terms of force as long as it is possible to regain Ethiopia's full sovereignty over its land without recourse to war. The second principle has to do with Ethiopia's absolute refusal to agree to proposals designed to appease the aggressor and to reward aggression. We have been consistent in following these two principles to a fault and we intend to continue along this path without fail.

The OAU proposal submitted to the two delegations in Ouagadougou has been acceptable to Ethiopia because it does not aim to reward aggression and it is in principle essentially based on the resolution adopted on 10 June 1998 by the thirty-fourth Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity at Ouagadougou.

In this regard, the clarifications that were given to the Ethiopian delegation by the OAU High-level Delegation on the key points of the proposal were the following:

(i) That the armed forces that would be redeployed or withdrawn from Badme and its environs are Eritrean troops;

(ii) That the reference to redeployment from Badme and its environs is meant to be understood as the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from all occupied Ethiopian territory and their return to positions held before 6 May 1998;

(iii) That the return of Ethiopian Civilian Administration includes the restoration of the Administration with its law enforcement organs minus regular troops.

The rest of the elements of the proposal are also consistent with Ethiopia's preparedness to contribute to a successful resolution of the underlying disputes on the basis of the pertinent colonial treaties and applicable international law.

The fact that Eritrea has rejected the OAU proposals for a Framework Agreement, which in a characteristic manner intended to confuse others their Foreign Ministry in a press release issued on 9 November has referred to as talking points, is also very consistent with the previous behaviour of the Eritrean authorities.

Eritrea had earlier rejected the joint proposal submitted by the United States of America and Rwanda; it had poured cold water on the OAU summit resolution of 10 June 1998 and had tried to emasculate Security Council resolution 1177 (1998) of 26 June 1998 through selective reading and by pretending that it had not been requested to cooperate with OAU and to accept and implement the OAU resolution of 10 June 1998.

I am not, of course, in a position to brief you in details on what the Eritrean side might have told the High-level OAU Delegation by way of explaining its rejection of the OAU proposal for a Framework Agreement. But no doubt - and this was made clear in a press conference given by the President of Eritrea upon his arrival in Asmara - the reason for the Eritrean rejection of this latest proposal is the same reason which was behind their rejection of the United States-Rwandan proposal. That has to do with the failure of this new proposal by OAU to bless the Eritrean aggression and to appease and reward the aggressor. One could imagine the lack of civility with which the Eritrean delegation might have behaved in the course of the deliberation, fragments of which we, like the rest of the international community, have begun to receive from the international media.

Of course now, on second thought, it appears that the Eritrean spin doctors have started to spread confusion - as can be witnessed from the press release issued by their Foreign Ministry to which I referred above - not only about the outcome of the Ouagadougou meeting, but even about the nature of the very proposal submitted by OAU and the reasons why the meeting did not produce the hoped-for results. The absolute shamelessness of the Eritrean Government and the fact that the Eritrean authorities care very little about their credibility can be seen in this same press release, whose content amounts to an insult to the intelligence of its intended readers. Unbelievable as it may seem, the Eritrean authorities are now saying officially that there was no proposal by OAU, and that what they were given in Ouagadougou was talking points which would be discussed at a future OAU Summit.

In whose court the ball is now after this Ouagadougou meeting cannot be doubted for a moment.

But there is also another element in what the stance of the international community might be after this event, which almost everybody has been awaiting with great anticipation for some time.

Should it be necessary to refer to what Ethiopia was being asked to do until this event and was being told about what this or that section of the international community might do following a clear-cut decision and a clear-cut proposal by OAU? Now OAU has spoken and its is very clear in whose court the ball is in this regard as well.

In this respect, it is perhaps very appropriate to refer to the very paradoxical events that have unfolded over the past six months with regard to how some have been very eager to try to penalize the aggressed, Ethiopia, without even raising a finger against the aggressor, Eritrea, ostensibly with the aim of promoting and facilitating the peaceful resolution of this crisis. The result, of course, unwittingly, has been to encourage the Eritrean authorities to persist, not only in their intransigence, but also in their lack of civility towards all those who have tried to make a difference for peace.

The refrain in the advice, mixed with threats, given to us has always been, of course, to wait for this OAU decision, following which all would behave in line with principles, in conformity with the need not to reward aggression and appease those who have shown this unmistakable behavioural pattern of violating international law.

What kind of support would the international community now give to the Organization of African Unity with a view to strengthening its hand in this exercise? Would the attempt at almost coddling the aggressor come to an end and would all those prepared to contribute to peace-making in this subregion tell the authorities in Asmara to reverse their aggression? Would the pressure be now applied to those who deserve to be put under pressure instead of on those who have stood for legality, international law and civilized behaviour? These are now questions which the Ethiopian people are asking. Practical action on the basis of a positive response to all these questions would no doubt be not only in the interest of the Ethiopian people, but also in the interest of the Eritrean people, who cannot be presumed to be pleased with what is being decided on their behalf by a leadership which many, in their heart of hearts, believe or suspect lacks either rationality or sanity.

We are, on the other hand, encouraged by some indications that have emerged over the past few days with regard to steps that seem to have been taken by some. I am referring to the frank, honest and principled talk that the Eritrean authorities have reportedly started to hear from some countries. I can assure you that our whole region and its peoples would always remain indebted to them and to all those who would follow their examples. It is only frank and honest talk and action based on them that will convince the Eritrean authorities that they are alone in their belief and in their conviction that what the world has is the law of the jungle.